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## The Boom of the Regional Crime Novel



Visa, Passport, Legal (© picture-alliance/chromorange) The Germans have apparently tasted blood. Because readers simply can't get enough of crime novels, regionalist authors are racing with each other to write murder stories in which one thing is never lacking: local color!

In German towns and villages malefactors have for some time now been robbing and murdering for all their worth. Germany is in crime novel fever, or more precisely regional crime novel fever, and the list of authors pressing onto the market with tales of mayhem and murder is becoming increasingly long. The success formula for a crime novel aiming at a wide readership seems easy enough to follow: you take a sympathetic police inspector, entrust him with a not too complicated case, and locate the action in a specific region of the country. Sounds simple – doesn't it?

### Cult status



Authors Michael Kobr (at right) and Volker Klüpfel present their new novel "Schutzpatron" in Munich in May 2011. (© dpa - Bildfunk)

From the Black Forest to Hiddensee, virtually every German province has produced its own police inspector. The most famous of them, Inspector Klüftinger, holds his protective hand over Kempten in the Allgäu (Bavaria) and was created in 2003 by the author duo Michael Kobr and Volker Klüpfel. Eight years later, "Klufti" (as the South German detective is affectionately known) is already puzzling over his sixth case (Schutzpatron or Patron Saint, 2011). Thanks to efficient marketing, which provides authors'

readings with a downright show character, Klufti has now blossomed into a brand with his own homepage and merchandising articles. The inspector without a first name is not only a household name to inveterate thriller readers, but has also contributed considerably to polishing the dim image of crime fiction as that of trivial literature into a high gloss.

### Local color

The beginnings of the crime novel set against a regional backdrop, however, came earlier. Starting with Eifel Blues in 1989, Jacques Berndorf established the genre of the so-called "Eifel thrillers", whose protagonist Siggie Baumeister soon gathered round him a loyal community of fans. What the fans like about the series is not only the thrilling plots but also the local color delivered with the setting in the mountainous stretch of land between Trier and Aachen. That the German reader likes best to get the creeps when murder and mayhem take place on his own doorstep has since been recognized not only by the creative duo behind Kluftinger.



Crime novelist Jacques Berndorf in the "Derrick Room", an homage to a famous German TV crime detective, in a "crime hotel" in the German city of Hillesheim (2010). (© picture-alliance/dpa)

Nicola Förg, Jörg Maurer, Birgit Lautenbach and many other writers have now emptied a veritable cornucopia of crime novels onto the German book market, whose qualitative scope is certainly impressive. Yet however various the German crime novel may be in narrative style and plot construction, all its authors use the investigations carried out by their characters to anchor the peculiarities of certain regions and their inhabitants in the story. The reader who knows his way around the place can recognize in these regional thrillers actually existing streets, bars and butchers. That inspectors from big cities, such as Friedrich Ani has created for Munich or Jan Seghers for Frankfurt, are met with somewhat less often than their rural colleagues is easily explained: in Germany there are simply more small than large cities, and so a higher number of potential venues with a provincial flair.

### Sales strategies

The penchant for crime in the neighborhood also shows something else: an apparent return in Germans, who are otherwise so reserved about national feelings, to local values, a trend that has also found expression in inbound tourism and the appetite for regional cooking. So stuffed cabbage and ramblings across the North German mudflats instead of petits fours and holidays in France? Marketing experts at book publishers at any rate trust that detailed descriptions of landscapes will go down as well with customers as daring car chases.



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Yet even if the regional is booming as never before, subtitles like "an Allgäu crime novel", meant as a well-intentioned aid to decision amidst the scramble for readers, can put the German crime novel under the hasty suspicion of being merely a form of Heimat literature embellished with mayhem and murder. The regional crime novel must also face the charge that it sometimes favors diverting entertainment over complex motives and sound background research. Whatever.

Perhaps it isn't meticulously worked out murder cases that make us reach for a regional novel, but rather something else: proximity. We all know that body contact favors bonding – and that also holds for the relationship between fictional characters and readers. The clincher: the better the reader comes to feel he knows the inspector in question, the more loyally he maintains his commercial alliance with him. A loving development of characters therefore pays as much as making novels into series.

#### Appealing figure



(© picture alliance / DUMONT Bildarchiv)

The "human touch" is to be found everywhere in the regional crime story. Instead of invulnerable super agents, Kluftinger and company are appealing figures equipped with lovable ticks. They are more or less odd detectives, whom we love above all because we encounter them at police stations in every small town. Clichés are not only permitted, but also desired. For example, it will hardly have escaped the notice of attentive Klufti readers that the Allgäu detective is mad about Kässpätzle (cheese noodles, a local delicacy), is useless with computers and has an allergy to corpses.

How weaknesses can make a character more sympathetic may be seen in the case of Louise Boni. Now in her fifth volume (*Das verborgene Netz* or *The Hidden Network*, 2010), she fights not only crime but also her alcohol problem. Her creator, Oliver Bottini, has already won several awards for his sensitive development of character and nuanced plot construction.

By Franziska Gerlach, a Munich-based freelance writer and teacher of German as a foreign language. / Translation: Jonathan Uhlner

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## Crime Novels



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**A Case for Literature - Crime Novels - Goethe-Institut (in German)**

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